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Nobody Puts Filmmaking in a Corner!

Martin Wood

Practice Editor

Questions of how we effectively share new insights with a wider public have entered upon the debate about all research activity in organisation studies. How can scholars demonstrate impact on audiences, users, and the beneficiaries of research in this field of work?

At first sight, we can hardly doubt there are many ways in which researchers actually do organisational research. We acknowledge a diversity and range of related quantitative and qualitative methods of academic study, in which epistemological issues of representation, interrogation and interpretation are interwoven (Bryman, 2003). Then we embrace fields such as anthropology, cultural, social and gender studies, entrepreneurship, history, innovation, management and business studies, philosophy, psychology and sociology. In a number of cases, particularly in the open access pages of *Organizational Aesthetics*, we take advantage of a range of outputs made of other stuff: art forms such as dance, theatre, music and poetry, design, and visual material such as photography and film media—we recently published our first documentary video (see Salovaara, 2014).

In this context, I find myself reflecting on the potential of film¹ as research (Wood, 2014; Wood and Brown, 2011, 2012). My proposition is that a lot of potential rests in the contribution of filmmaking to communicate new insights in a form that its prospective audience both within and beyond the academic community understands and is accessible to them (Brewer, 2013). Whilst fraught with difficulties, my conclusion is that applied research facilitating viewer (or reader) engagement and understanding can be done in, or through filmmaking, just as it can be done by writing a book or an article.

I believe that filmmaking offers ground for affective thinking that conventional printed books and journal articles do not immediately give. What I am talking about here is film's propensity to trigger-off a variety of sensory responses, co-producing knowledge in viewing events. Yet there is evidence that film-based methods are not of central importance in organisation studies.

Now, academic journals seem to hold digital video and audio at arm's length from their printed and electronic digital editions and current methods of peer review are struggling to develop an appropriate language to judge the research quality of film-based practice (Dovey, 2007)—a picture of stagnating routine. In fact, arguments taking films to be capable of producing substantial new insights seem at odds with our very idea of research and have been considered 'frivolous' for some time by sociologists (Taylor & Saarinen, 1994). Film in organization studies thus tends to be largely unexplored—in terms of the production and distribution of knowledge (Meyer et al, 2013).

At least a couple of assumptions, rehearsed and reviewed most familiarly by philosophers of film (e.g. Carel and Tuck, 2011; Sinnerbrink, 2011; Smuts, 2009),

inevitably colour the debate about whether filmmaking can be a form of academic research. First, in both its content and its possibilities, we must define film-based research by reference to traditional written outcomes. Here, filmmaking, like writing, should depend on properly developed arguments. The assumption is that 'proper' argumentation requires a logic that no film could conceivably adopt. What is objectionable about this notion is that we eliminate the sensory dimensions of films *themselves* because of their putative non-rational content.

Second, film-based practice ought to make an original contribution to research by *exclusively cinematic means* (i.e. that is no other media could make similar contributions). To the extent that this assumption means the contribution is 'unique' to film, it could be difficult to explain why the film itself is responsible for doing the research. However, this criterion is unfair—we do not use it with respect to evaluations of written work. If we did apply it universally, as a standard to define the manner of all research, the implication is that neither film nor printed books and journal articles could make a significant contribution. Within this scenario, who can make the claim that they produce, reproduce and disseminate knowledge by means *exclusive to written words*? In addition, what can we do to reverse this situation?

The first thing to say is that it can be easy for those of us working with the medium of film to over-estimate its significance as an organisational research activity in its own right. It may be film, as a source of affective thinking, does possess certain aesthetic resources for the arousal of non-rational understanding that books and articles cannot match. However, such a 'bold thesis' is not the claim I want to defend.

My more modest assertion is that film, because it evokes aesthetic qualities rather than merely cognitive understanding to engage the viewer within a vivid experience, may enlarge the set of things that can communicate a body of knowledge, in the face of a general basic fact. Namely, film is at least equally conducive to thought — bodily, affective and cognitive — helping its viewers grasp the world viewed, as we have conventionally assumed written work to be (Lyotard, 1993).

Many researchers across the arts (Dovey, 2011), humanities (Smuts, 2009) and social sciences (Pink, 2013) have reflected on the distinctive character of visual material for these disciplines. This body of work may facilitate the formulation of a schema that allows recognition of film and other aesthetic outputs, regardless of the type of applied research environment, to meet the definition of research.

To this end, in terms of understanding a subject, film can readily meet the remit of research if it can synthesize, interpret, and connect findings in a way that brings novel, expressive and imaginative meaning to those facts (Smuts, 2009). Moreover, film can make an independent contribution by the artful use of certain audio and visual conventions, such as camera and editing techniques (Dovey, 2007). In many cases, although not all, film may offer ground for intuition, as Bergson calls it, through which one begins to feel the meanings that the film is helping its viewers grasp. Finally, filmmaking may give a certain kind of impetus to a wider critical reflection on past assumptions (Alvesson and Sandberg 2011). Here, the capacity of film to disrupt previous categories derives from doing and the senses.

For me, filmmaking is valuable in organization research because it sits in the wide boundary that imprecisely separates academic study and artistic practice. It is this concept of relationships — a space of praxis — promoting research using analytical tools from varied and complementary fields to deal with complex themes at the crossroads of creativity, culture and the economy, which sparks my interest in this area. I thus encourage more contributors to *Organizational Aesthetics* to make films!

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¹ For ease of expression, I use the term film to refer to all forms of the moving image. I take it that film no longer implies traditional celluloid reproduction of moving photographic images but also digital film generated by computers and distributed by means of the Internet.